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## *What You Should Know Before Buying Drugs From Foreign Countries or Over the Internet*



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### *Purchasing Prescription Drugs from Foreign Countries and Reducing Drug Costs*

The prices of prescription drugs are high. Some patients go without food in order to purchase their medications or reduce the quantity of prescription drugs they are supposed to take to make a supply of medication last longer. Other patients simply don't purchase medication prescribed for them because it is too expensive.

Today, many patients are seeking lower priced drugs from nontraditional sources – places other than their local pharmacies. Some patients are purchasing prescription drugs from foreign countries, typically Canada or Mexico, because the prices are lower. Other patients are purchasing drugs online, from companies they do not know. Some patients purchase these drugs online without a prescription written for them by a health care provider.

Can you purchase drugs for lower prices? What should you know about purchasing drugs from foreign countries? What about purchasing drugs over the Internet? Do you really need a prescription before you obtain prescription drugs? The following information may help you in making wise choices.



### *Frequently Asked Questions*

**Q** Can I bring prescription drugs I buy outside the USA into the country legally?

**A** The Federal Food and Drug Administration

(the FDA) regulates prescription drugs made in the USA. Under federal law it is illegal for anyone except a drug manufacturer to import prescription drugs into the USA. There are strict requirements on drug manufacturers who import drugs.

These import laws were established for consumer protection – so that the only drugs available in the USA have been made by companies approved by the FDA, and have been manufactured at locations inspected by the government to produce the specific drugs. These laws are important for consistency – and uniformity – so that a specific drug has the same ingredients, strength, and will act in the same way regardless

“Over the Counter Drugs” (or OTC drugs) are the drugs that you can buy without a prescription (for example, aspirin or cold medicines). Consumers can go to a store and select OTC drugs themselves.

“Prescription drugs” means those drugs that are considered so dangerous that they may be sold only after a health care provider (for example, a doctor or nurse) has examined a patient and ordered the drug for the patient. The order is typically called a prescription. Consumers cannot legally purchase the prescription drugs without an order or prescription from a health care provider who has examined the patient.

of who manufactures the drug or when the drug was made. This is important because it means the strength of the drug will be the same for every dose.

## Frequently Asked Questions (continued)



Such consistency in your medication is important for health care providers to treat you, and for you to receive the drug treatment planned and prescribed for you.

However, the FDA does not always enforce provisions for importing prescription drugs. Sometimes prescription drugs that are not FDA approved for sale in the USA are allowed in the USA on “humanitarian grounds” to treat serious conditions such as AIDS before the drugs are approved for use in the USA. Also, in the past the FDA has not enforced provisions against those who obtain a 90-day supply of medication for their personal use.

**Q** Why are prescription drug prices lower in other countries than here at home?

**A** There are a number of reasons. Among them: some governments set maximum drug prices for prescription drugs which holds down drug prices. In the USA, the government does not set maximum prices overall for prescription drugs. Also, typically the costs of researching and developing new drugs are passed on to American customers as part of a drug’s price.



**Q** Why are prescription drug prices different at the local pharmacies in my neighborhood?



**A** There are a number of reasons – among them:

- ♦ *Volume discounts* -- some pharmacies can purchase drugs from wholesalers at lower prices than other pharmacies, based on the quantities of drugs sold or whether the pharmacy is part of a buying group with other pharmacies.
- ♦ *Rebates* – money is sometimes paid to pharmacies by drug manufacturers for sales of particular drugs. Not all pharmacies may get these rebates.
- ♦ *Overhead* -- charges that cover the expenses for the operations of the pharmacy and the services provided by the pharmacy.

**Q** Are the drugs I get from a foreign country lower in quality or strength?

**A** The drugs you obtain this way may be of the same quality as those you get in the USA – the prescription drugs may even have been manufactured here. However, you cannot tell what the drug is just by looking at it. If the drugs are counterfeit, are of a different strength, have been stored improperly or are not really the drugs the label says they are, a patient using such drugs could suffer serious health problems.

## Is the Internet a good way to purchase prescription drugs?

Sometimes. Be cautious and careful.

- ♦ Make certain you are dealing with a pharmacy, and not another type or unknown form of drug supplier. Some businesses operating what appear to be Internet pharmacies are not pharmacies at all.
- ♦ Learn where the company is located – it may be located outside the USA in a country you know little about and where there is little government regulation of drug supplies.
- ♦ Beware if you do not need a prescription to purchase prescription drugs. The requirement for a prescription from a health care provider who has examined you is a legal requirement that exists to protect your health.
- ♦ Be careful if you must provide personally identifiable information (health information, social security number, credit card numbers) -- identity theft is a growing problem and you may not know to whom you are providing this sensitive and important personal information.
- ♦ Evaluate all costs for purchasing the drugs this way – it may not be cheaper after all.
- ♦ Purchase prescription drugs only from sites that are certified by national organizations – like the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy VIPPS seal on the Web site (the California Board of Pharmacy can help you with this information).
- ♦ Advise your health care provider if you obtain prescription drugs this way.

## Before buying drugs from a foreign country or over the Internet, carefully consider your options.

- ♦ Beware of any changes in your health after taking any drug obtained this way. If there is a change or if you feel differently, talk to your health care provider.
- ♦ Consider whether you want to give a credit card number to a company that is making these purchases for you.
- ♦ Determine the handling and other extra fees you pay for imported prescription drugs. How much will you really save?
- ♦ Ask any company that orders prescription drugs for you what it will do if there is a problem with the medication you receive.
- ♦ Keep your health care provider informed.



For further assistance, please contact:

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